

Appropriations Committee Hearing on House Bill #6380

March 4, 2011

Dear Senator Harp, Senator Prague, Representative Walker, Representative Hamm and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in regards to HB #6380 which recommends the elimination of BESB.

My name is Catherine Summ and I am a teacher of the visually impaired employed by BESB as an education consultant. I have worked at BESB for almost 12 years. Prior to that I worked as a teacher of the visually impaired in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Sweden.

I understand that our state government is faced with the difficult task of reducing our deficit, but the purpose of this testimony is to tell you why it is important to maintain centralized services through BESB for the blind and visually impaired population in Connecticut and vote no on House Bill #6380.

This bill represents an increase in service and equipment costs, reduction in quality of services due to the disintegration of collaborative programs, in addition to the potential loss of income and employability of the blind and visually impaired population due to reduced skills training programs specific to blindness.

BESB provides comprehensive services for children and adults who are blind and visually impaired, with the goal of maximizing independence, community inclusion, and employment. Some examples of services to children and adults include independent living instruction, community travel, instruction in the braille code, the use of low vision aids, preparation for post-secondary education, and job training skills. In order to successfully provide these services, the collaborative work between all the divisions at BESB must be allowed to continue.

Officially, children from the children's services division are not referred to vocational rehabilitation and adult services until age 14, but, discussions regarding transition related issues start much earlier. Without collaboration between divisions, there will be a loss of facilitation for paid part time and summer employment for students, job shadowing, internship and mentoring opportunities. A loss of collaboration between

divisions will also result in the loss of comprehensive career based summer camps and training programs that focus on vision related skills that need to be learned in order to pursue employment.

Through collaboration between the divisions, BESB provides transition school-to-work initiatives to prepare high school students for employment and post-secondary education. These programs provide opportunities for young adults in such areas as career exposure, mentoring, independent living, and leadership training. By splitting the agency into the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education, the potential for all of these programs to continue is slim. If these in-state training programs are available, BESB can continue to recommend these over costly out of state options. This represents a substantial cost savings to the state and attests to the agency's cost effectiveness.

Individuals and organizations provided nearly 23,000 volunteer service hours to the agency and its clients during fiscal year 2009-2010. BESB clients were assisted by volunteers with daily living skills activities and transcription of books and materials into braille. The estimated total value of these volunteer hours exceeded \$470,000.00. If BESB is split and sent to two different state agencies how will this no cost resource be maintained?

The divisions at BESB share an assistive technology lab, which consists of such items as electronic braille note takers and specialized computer programs. A consolidation of BESB will result in loss of trained staff and equipment. A typical braille note taker can cost in excess of \$5,000.00. Another resource, the BESB low vision center, is available for all BESB clients to use. What will happen to the trained staff and equipment if BESB is split into DSS and the Dept. of Ed?

All divisions utilize the BESB professional resource library, which houses approximately 1,000 volumes. In addition, our braille unit stores about 60,000 braille and large print volumes, each the size of a phone book. Where will these libraries go?

The client in-take process is handled by trained individuals for all divisions and if they agency is split, whose responsibility will this be?

Although services of this type will remain intact for the remainder of this fiscal year, what can be guaranteed to our clients, students, and their families in fiscal years 2012 and beyond?

Please consider the impact dividing BESB will have on the blind and visually impaired population.

Respectfully Submitted,

Catherine Summ

Education Consultant (BESB)